

JOHN LE CARRÉ

His next effort recapped *Spy's* success: it was *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, a tersely written account of George Smiley's hunt for a mole in the highest levels of the Circus, a story based loosely on Kim Philby's much-publicized defection from Britain to the Soviet Union in 1963.

With *Tinker, Tailor* and Smiley, Cornwell hit his stride. The book was followed by a string of successes pinned to Smiley's achievements. There was *The Honourable Schoolboy*, in which Smiley, by then chief of the Circus, plays a behind-the-scenes role in an Asian web of East-West intrigue. There was *Smiley's People*, in which the mild-mannered secret agent finally confronts and triumphs over his long-standing archrival, the Soviet spymaster Karla. But the creator found himself tiring of his creation. "The very success of Alec Guinness's [television] depiction of Smiley was beginning to make him unsecret to me," says Cornwell. "I wanted to leave myself without him as a prop, and give myself the opportunity to write about the new generation, younger people, modern problems."

If Cornwell seems reluctant to remain wedded to one character or milieu, it may be due to the disorientation of his childhood. Born in 1931 in the city of Poole, he hardly knew his mother: she abandoned her husband and children when David was very young. That left David and his older brother, Tony, in the dubious care of Ronnie Cornwell, a charming but reckless schemer with a penchant for lying, a bad-luck streak, and a prison record; he was sentenced to two years for fraud in 1934-35, when David was four. Ronnie packed the boys off to boarding school while he gambled, spent his earnings wildly, chased women, and roamed the globe on illicit money-making ventures. He even made a stab at politics, repeatedly run-

ning for a seat in Parliament as a Liberal; he always lost and returned to his life on the fringes of the law. "Almost everything he did had a conspiratorial side to it," says Cornwell. "There is a correlation, I suppose, between the secret life of my father and the secret life I entered at a formative age."

At 15 Cornwell dropped out of Sherbourne, the High Church school where he had spent most of his early years, to study in Switzerland. He had found Sherbourne's diet of regulations and punishment restrictive. But it was not the school that drove him abroad: he wanted to get as far as he could from his father. During school vacations, his father had often enticed his young son into acting as a cover for his own devious schemes. Says Cornwell: "I was his charming clown, the one who answered the phone to explain why he couldn't come to a meeting or that a check was in the mail. I fronted for him until I was fifteen years old—and then I refused."

But that was hardly the end of the bizarre father-son relationship. Even in Switzerland Cornwell found himself "fiddling currency" for Ronnie. After the publication of *Spy*, Cornwell used some of his book profits to get his father out of trouble with the police in Zurich, where he had been arrested for failing to pay his hotel bills. Later, Cornwell used his diplomatic connections to free his father from prison in Indonesia, where he had been arrested for currency trafficking. "When he died," says Cornwell, "he had an office in Jermyn Street, a house in Maidenhead, a third wife, and liabilities of more than \$2 million." Cornwell adds ruefully: "He dominated my life, and I am still unable to write about him."

Cornwell now leads a quiet family life. He has been married since 1972 to Jane Eustace, a former editor who acts as Cornwell's personal secretary, manager, and troubleshooter. They have a

son, Nicholas, and Cornwell also keeps in close touch with his three sons from his previous marriage. The family divides its time between a rambling house in London and an imposing stone house in rural Cornwall, on the southwesternmost tip of the English coast, with a sweeping view of the sea.

From his vantage point in remote Cornwall, the novelist views the world with detached skepticism. "I've always had a frightful contempt for the self-indulgent dilemmas of affluent Western man, compared to the experiences of real hell, of people who spent twenty years in jail for almost immaterial reasons," he says. His less-than-flattering portrayal of the British secret service—and of the CIA—has drawn strong criticism from many people in intelligence circles. ("The basic difference between the SIS and the CIA," he says wryly, "is that the CIA wants to own Andropov—whereas we just want to own his confidential typist.") In fact, Cornwell is a patriotic man who strongly believes in the need for intelligence work. "It's bad enough to have an inefficient secret service, but to have none at all would be disastrous," he says. "Secret services are the only real measure of a nation's political health."

Cornwell and his companions leave Beirut for Athens, the next stop in the recreation of Charlie's perilous journey. But the shadow of Beirut lingers on. At dinner that night in the Athens Hilton, the talk turns back to the wastelands that Cornwell has just seen and the Palestinian camps that were bombed and devastated after the Israeli invasion. He says he would like to work on a book that would be the antithesis of such war and destruction—a book on the English countryside. Rural England, he says simply, is still the only place to live. □

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